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SUBJECT: FINLAND: REACTION TO IRAQI ELECTIONS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EARLE I. MACK FOR REASONS 1.4 (B AND D)

11. (C) Finland's Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja has not issued a formal statement on the Iraqi elections, but told reporters in Brussels on January 31 that the elections were a step in the right direction. He said that he was particularly encouraged that the majority of Iraqis voted despite the difficult conditions and inherent danger. Tuomioja said that "We are seeing a significant vote of confidence in the democratic process." The Foreign Minister also stressed the need for "continued EU support" in Iraq in order to make positive progress toward stabilization and democracy. Although President Tarja Halonen and Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen have not publicly remarked on the elections, Riisto Volanen, the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, told DCM Weisberg that the GoF had decided to "speak with one voice" on the elections -- and that the voice was Tuomioja's. Volanen said that this did not exclude the possibility of further comments by the Prime Minister, but that for the moment, Tuomioja spoke for the entire government.

12. (C) During a working lunch with the Ambassador in Helsinki on February 2, an upbeat Tuomioja said that "we are all happy that the elections were able to be carried out despite the great difficulties, and that the turn-out was so high." He commented ironically that voter participation was higher even than in European elections, or for that matter, U.S. presidential elections. Tuomioja added that -- depending on the security situation, which remains precarious, despite the elections -- "the day is coming nearer" when Finland would be able to re-open its embassy in Baghdad. (At present the Finnish ambassador to Damascus is also accredited to Iraq, although he has not yet presented his credentials there.)

13. (C) The Ambassador thanked the minister for the contributions Finland has already made in Iraq -- supplying police instructors to the training facility in Jordan, playing a lead role in supporting the UN Protection Force with an early contribution of one million euros, and providing forensic scientists to survey mass graves. We welcome Finland's engagement, and would welcome their ideas on what else they could do. Regarding Finland's contributions to date, Tuomioja commented that some of the police trained by Finnish instructors have already been killed by insurgents, which unfortunately reflects the security environment. He said he has also heard of allegations of human rights violations committed by Iraqi police officers, "which does not help matters." In any case, the EU is still debating how to proceed, and may send a group to Iraq to survey the situation. Finland would expect to participate in such a group. (Note: Septel will follow with full report on the Ambassador's conversation with Tuomioja)

Editorial comment on the elections

14. (U) Reaction in the Finnish media to the successful Iraqi elections was mostly positive, if guardedly so. Finland's leading national daily, the Helsingin Sanomat, ran an editorial on February 1 warning that there was still a tough road ahead in Iraq, but acknowledging that "Even the sharpest critics of the President (Bush) ought to avoid the temptation of belittling the achievement simply because it is also a political victory for the White House." Other dailies were more straightforward in their positive assessment of the election. The centrist Aamulehti reported that "It will take several days before we get the final results, but we can declare one winner: the people of Iraq." The ruling Center Party's official newspaper, Suomenmaa, wrote that "Clearly the election was a success. It was a success for the policies of the U.S. ... it was also a great blow to the insurgents and the terrorists." Coverage of the elections on Finland's major television networks was similar: cautious about the road ahead, but upbeat about the elections' success and what they meant to the Iraqi people.

MACK